News

Priests vestments are pictured in a 2018 photo. (CNS photo/Tyler Orsburn)

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Catholic bishops in California have asked the U.S. Supreme Court to review a case challenging a state law that expands the time survivors of childhood sexual assault have to file their claims.

The petition, first reported this week by the Catholic News Agency, was filed April 15 by nine California Catholic dioceses and archdioceses after the California Supreme Court refused to consider the case — Roman Catholic Bishop of Oakland v. Superior Court of California of Los Angeles County — in November.

In 2002, California enacted a one-year window for plaintiffs to bring sexual-abuse claims against the Catholic Church and others "even if the statute of limitations had expired many decades before," the bishops said in their petition.

When that year ended, the state attempted to revive lapsed claims three more times, but former Gov. Jerry Brown vetoed each bill, the petition notes. But Brown's successor, Gavin Newsom, signed legislation in 2019 that allowed certain assault victims more time to bring suits, which the bishops are calling "an unconstitutional double-revival regime."

"This time," the bishops' petition reads, "defendants' past conduct is subject not only to claims for compensatory and punitive damages that were previously time-barred twice over, but also to additional penalties (in the form of 'treble' damages) based on a newly defined category of 'cover up' activity."

The Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests, or SNAP, lambasted the bishops' petition in a statement Wednesday (May 4).

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"To attempt to invalidate this law by going around the lawmakers now is at best disingenuous and is also a slap in the face to the thousands of victims — not just Catholic victims — seeking solace and justice," SNAP said in the statement.

The extension of the time window to bring cases, SNAP said, was necessary because survivors abused in the 1990s and early 2000s "have yet to realize the damage done to them and remain silent in their pain."

But the dioceses claim that during the initial one-year window, they faced more than 1,000 lawsuits alleging misconduct dating back to the 1930s and reached a series of settlements worth more than a billion dollars "to bring these matters to a close," according to the petition.

"To finance these settlements, they expended significant resources, sold vast swaths of Church property, and in some cases exhausted or relinquished insurance coverage for past and future abuse claims," the petition said.

"Review is critical now, before the Catholic Church in the largest State in the union is forced to litigate hundreds or thousands of cases seeking potentially billions of dollars in retroactive punitive damages," the bishops claimed.

The nine dioceses and archdioceses listed in the petition are represented by: Archbishop José H. Gomez of Los Angeles; Bishop Kevin W. Vann of Orange; Bishop

Joseph V. Brennan of Fresno; Bishop Daniel E. Garcia of Monterey; Bishop Michael C. Barber of Oakland; Bishop Jaime Soto of Sacramento; Archbishop Salvatore Cordileone of San Francisco; Bishop Oscar Cantú of San Jose; and Bishop Robert F. Vasa of Santa Rosa.